

Review of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea*, edited by Jennifer Keith et al

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Abstract

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Keywords

Anne Finch, poetry, drama, scholarly edition

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Anne Finch. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea. Volume 1, Early Manuscript Books*, edited by Jennifer Keith with Claudia Thomas Kairoff; associate editor Jean I. Marsden, Cambridge University Press, 2019. 819+clxvi pp. ISBN: 9780521196222.

Anne Finch. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea. Volume 2, Later Collections, Print and Manuscript*, edited by Jennifer Keith with Claudia Thomas Kairoff, Cambridge University Press, 2021. 663+cxxx pp. ISBN: 9780521196222.

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From the moment of its publication, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea* became the standard scholarly edition of Finch's writing. Indeed, considering that its two volumes replace, among other resources, Myra Reynolds' admirable though flawed edition of 1903, my hope is that these volumes stand as the preeminent resource on Finch for at least as long as the 121 years that have intervened between that work and this one. Until now, readers of Finch's poetry hoping to assemble something like a complete scholarly reading of her work have had to aggregate sources: manuscript writings that can be quite difficult to access for all but the most well-funded scholars; the Reynolds edition; online repositories of varying quality; Barbara McGovern and Charles Hinnant's edition of *The Anne Finch Wellesley Manuscript Poems* (1998); and anthologized works. With this meticulously produced, highly accessible, and deeply learned new edition, Jennifer Keith and her editorial team have presented to the field of eighteenth-century studies a profoundly valuable opportunity to engage fully with one of the period's most compelling authors. In addition, this work will surely enhance the study of poetry and women's writing more broadly.

Anne Finch, a prolific writer with deep connections to the social and political upheavals of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, was a trenchant observer of the world around her, often refracting her commentary through comparisons with or rewritings of classical and biblical materials. She was also a thoughtful and contemplative writer, with deep commitments to friendship and religious devotion that she expressed in her creative work. Yet despite the richness of her oeuvre, her position in literary history has shifted in the centuries since her death in 1720, with moments, as Rachel Bowman suggests, of higher and lower visibility. This edition presents Finch's body of work in ways that illuminate the capacious range of genres, themes, and tones with which she experimented. Seasoned and new readers alike will learn much from these volumes, which lend themselves well not only to scholarly research but also to teaching, especially given the fact of their availability in both print and digital formats. Each work is accompanied by a judiciously written headnote, as well as detailed line-by-line explanatory and textual notes. The placement of these discussions at the back of each volume allows readers to decide their own paths through Finch's poetry; that is, those who want to start with notes and refer to them often will have no trouble doing so, but those who wish to read the poems on their own can proceed without interruption. These choices are apt: given the complexities of the editorial, political, and social histories related to Finch's work, the editors of this volume may well have found themselves producing a *Dunciad*-like project in which two lines of poetry struggle to emerge from several pages of commentary. Moreover, this edition benefits from its companion website, [The Anne Finch Digital Archive](#). Among other features, this publicly

accessible site makes available updates to relevant bibliography and multimedia resources such as [musical performances of Finch's songs](#).

The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea also stands as a superb model of the collaborative nature of high-quality editorial work. I appreciate that both volumes begin with a “Preface and Acknowledgments” (identical in each) offering a transparent accounting not only of the genesis of the project and its indebtedness to earlier efforts, but also of the specific work done by Keith, Claudia Thomas Kairoff, Jean I. Marsden, and Bowman. Its exhaustive acknowledgment of the generous contributions of many other scholars, librarians, institutions, administrators, and other experts emphasizes the massive scope of the project at the same time that it points to the necessity of collaboration and good will in academic work. In a moment when academia can seem fractured and marked by isolation, this edition makes clear the possibilities that emerge when a broad range of knowledgeable people work together. In many ways, this is an edition that teaches the act of editorial work, and its attendant moments of interpretive decision making, at the same time that it achieves its primary aim of presenting Finch’s poetry.

One way in which these volumes achieve that implicit instruction is through their extensive introductory materials: a chronology, general and textual introductions, and descriptive bibliographical accounts of the Northamptonshire and Folger Manuscripts (Volume 1) and *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* and the Wellesley Manuscript (Volume 2). These supporting sections are presented in engaging, lucid prose—no small feat given the intensive level of technical detail required to articulate the editors’ approaches to textual variants, collation, and other important processes that do not typically make for riveting reading. This is clearly an edition done with readers in mind, and one that balances scholarly rigor with a friendly, accessible tone.

Given the scope of the work involved—tracing historical and political links, social connections, and textual variants—this edition is, as a general rule, impressively error-free. The notes are supported by intensive research, with frequent citation of relevant reference and scholarly texts, especially for subject areas such as Jacobitism, genre study, and classical reception. I did notice one problem, however, in the notes for “All is Vanity.” In a discussion of the dating of the poem, the headnote points to the publication of John Dryden’s *Works of Virgil* (1697), a monumental cultural event to which Finch refers. The headnote states that “neither AF’s nephew, the Earl of Winchilsea, nor her closest relatives were among the subscribers, who probably received their copies in mid-July” (1.660). It is true that Finch’s family were not among the “first,” or five-guinea, subscribers, who were featured most prominently in Dryden’s volume. But her husband was indeed a “second,” or two-guinea, subscriber to the *Virgil*; he appears on the second subscriber list as “*The Ho. Colon. Finch.*” John Barnard’s detailed contribution to *John Dryden, Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford, 2000) makes clear that this was Heneage Finch (1656–1726), husband of Anne. Yet I remain unsure whether this issue represents a lapse in research or an issue caused by unclear writing. This is a relatively small oversight in an otherwise highly detailed headnote that captures the poem’s connections to Ecclesiastes, Juvenal, Dryden, Cowley, and the Pindaric ode form, but it is significant that Anne Finch would have been more directly familiar with Dryden’s text than the headnote allows.

I want to close by acknowledging how transformative it can be to read Finch in these volumes. Having written on and taught her poetry with relative frequency in my own career, I found myself marveling at all the ways her work felt new when I could sit down and read her poetry, plays, and correspondence in one place. For instance, as the editors observe, Finch's devotional and contemplative poetry constitutes a significant portion of her oeuvre, and was likely written both early and late in her career despite the fact that we encounter poems of this kind largely in the Wellesley Manuscript (2.lxxvi). For instance, perhaps as a result of my own readerly tendencies, or because of the ways that Finch has been discussed generally, I had not given extensive thought to her more expressly religious writings. Yet in reading them here, I found myself working through a rich array of works that engage in fascinating ways with spiritual life, especially as it intersects with personal and political disaster, at the same time that they raise their own questions about translation and imitation of ancient texts. In addition, as those familiar with Finch know, much of her work can feel not only rooted in its moment but also quite modern, and Keith and her co-editors capture that balance well here too. For instance, they observe how "A Letter to Mrs: Arabella Marrow" "describes the chilling effect of government surveillance" on real or perceived political dissidents (2.lxxvii). Given the ease of access to Finch's full body of known works in this edition, those of us who hope to continue making a case for the relevance of eighteenth-century studies to readers in our own time will find much to support that work here.

On page after page, readers of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea* will find poems that have been edited carefully, interpreted in ways that encourage future scholarship, and supported by clear and sufficient notes. The creators of this edition have done a great service to the field, and their work deserves to be used, and celebrated, for a long time.